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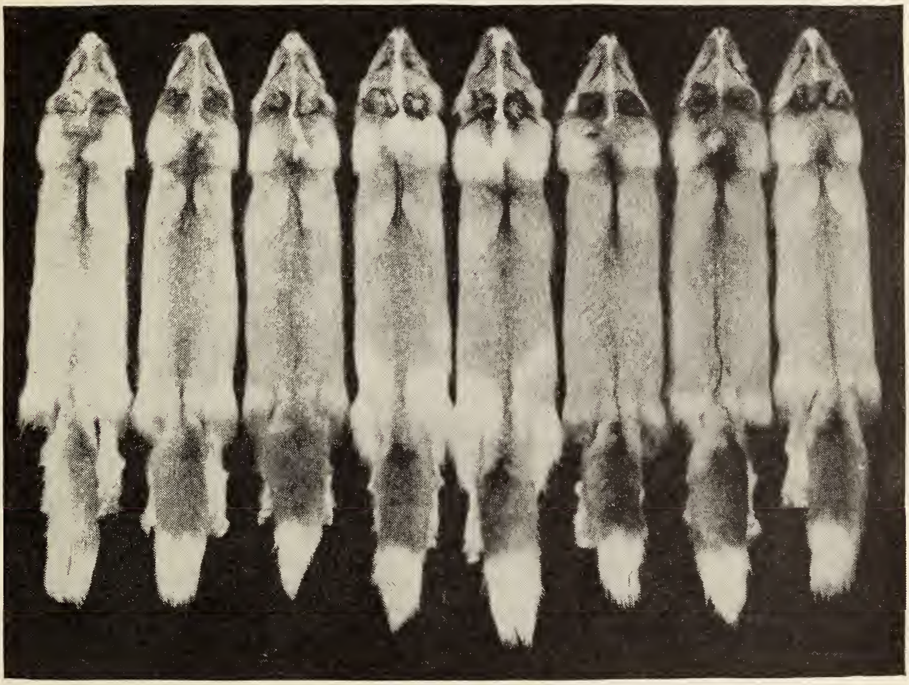
FUR FARMING POSSIBILITIES



LEAFLET NO. 267

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

FUR FARMING POSSIBILITIES

By Charles E. Kellogg

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FUR FARMING is a livestock project, rather than a quick way to make big profits. Large returns from it come slowly and only after many risks have been overcome and many unpleasant tasks performed. A natural love of animals is important for the fur farmer and high school or college courses in animal husbandry are desirable, though not essential. Possibly the best way to acquire the knowledge necessary for success in this undertaking is to work for a while on a well-established fur farm. Although in general just another phase of animal industry, fur farming presents new and interesting problems posed by wild animals when first confined in pens.[1]

Scarcity of fur animals in the wild and the high value of animals producing unusual and excellent furs have been the primary incentives for raising fur animals in pens. Not all of these ventures have been profitable. By selecting the best animals for mating, the fur farmer can improve the color, length of fur, density, quality, and other factors that go to make fine furs.

In general, colder climates are more desirable than warm for fur farming, though good pelts have been produced in pens at sea level in moderate climates. Marginal land often can be satisfactorily used. An abundant supply of cheap feed suitable for the type of animals to be raised should be available. Refrigeration is essential, if mink, fox, or other meat- or fish-eating animals are being considered. Electric power for mixing feeds is a necessity. As certain localities or States require that a license be obtained, or have other restrictions, the proper authorities should be consulted.

Fur is produced in Alaska both in the wild and in captivity. Fishery canning waste is abundant there, but other feeds and equipment costs are high.[2]

GETTING A START

After thorough investigation of the possibilities of the particular type of fur farming in which he is interested, the fur farmer should buy equipment and animals on a modest scale. Good equipment lasts longer, reduces labor, and provides better sanitary conditions. Pro-

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[1] The U. S. Department of Agriculture is concerned only with fur animals raised in captivity. The Fish and Wildlife Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, Washington 25, D. C., deals with fur animals in the wild.

[2] Information on fur farming in Alaska may be obtained from Alaska Experimental Fur Station, Petersburg, Alaska.

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tection against marauding animals and theft, as well as against the escape of the fur animals, is important. Excellent breeding stock, though costing more, usually returns more profit and certainly affords the owner more pleasure in his work. The highest priced stock is not necessarily the best. It pays to buy only from reputable breeders.

The United States Department of Agriculture maintains a list of fur-farm associations, but not a list of breeders. The associations and fur journals give out information on prices and where to buy breeding stock. The Department does not vouch for the integrity or financial standing of an individual or organization.

SILVER FOXES

The silver fox, known in the early days of fox farming as the silver-black fox, is a mutation of the red fox in which the black pigment has replaced the red. Mutations to black have occurred in wild red foxes in Alaska, as well as in eastern Canada. Silver foxes, mated in pens, breed true; that is, they ordinarily produce nothing but silver pups. However, several mutations have appeared or have been developed in pen-raised silver foxes during the last 25 years. Some skins produced by such mutations are known as White Marked, Platinum, Glacier Blue, Pearl, and Pearlitina. The first Platinum skins sold from American-bred foxes are shown on the cover.

The average weight of males at maturity is 12 to 15 pounds and that of the females 10 to 12 pounds, when the animals are in good, thrifty condition. Matings occur from the middle of January to the middle of March. Pair-mating one male, technically known as a dog, and one female, or vixen, in the same pen, is practiced by the larger ranchers. Some of the smaller ranchers mate their foxes polygamously; that is, 1 dog is bred to as many as 10 vixens.

Not more than one litter is produced each year. The gestation period is 52 days. A few litters of 9 to 10 are obtained, but an average production of 3½ to 4 young for each vixen is considered satisfactory, and, of course, some vixens do not produce each year. Though ranchers with large numbers of animals leave the pups with the parents until September, others wean them at about 8 weeks of age, when they weigh about 4 pounds.

Young foxes attain the weight of mature animals when about 7 months old. The pelts are taken in November or December—when the animal is 9 to 10 months old—depending on climatic conditions. Fox pups will breed the following spring when they are about a year old. Foxes are productive until 9 to 10 years of age, but they are seldom kept that long.

The mature animals begin shedding their fur the early part of June. Shedding is usually completed by August, depending on climatic conditions and the general health of the animal. A full growth of new fur must develop by pelting time in early winter. Fox pups shed their fur but the process is more gradual.

At the larger ranches, breeding pairs of foxes are still provided with ground-floor pens, 20 by 40 feet to about 40 feet square, with a 2-foot wire overhang to prevent escape. At other ranches the males and females are kept in separate pens 6 to 8 feet wide, from 16 to 30 feet long, and 4 to 6 feet high. A wire netting covers the entire top of the pen. The raised floors are of wire, for sanitation and parasite control.

During the breeding and lactation period foxes should be fed twice a day on rations containing 25 to 50 percent of raw horse meat and offal from slaughter or packing houses. The rest of the ration is made up of dry concentrates, vegetables, and water. Continuous feeding of rations having higher than 10 percent of fish may cause losses among foxes. Pups have been maintained during the summer and furred out satisfactorily on dry complete feeds, which are made up into pellet or cube form by many feed companies. A mature or half-grown fox consumes about 1 pound of feed a day. Most ranchers feed only in the evening during the summer and fall.

As many as 350,000 silver fox skins have been produced annually in the United States. It has been estimated, however, that no more than 60,000 skins will be produced here in 1949. Long furs were not wanted in the late 1940's, and average prices of $12 to $16 for furs that cost more than $30 to produce sent many fox farmers out of business and caused others to reduce their operations. Though indications are that there will be a limited demand for choice fox skins, it is not advisable for beginners to engage in fox farming until the demand for these furs has increased.

MINKS

Though minks were raised in captivity for their fur as early as 1866, mink skins were not produced in quantity until the 1930's. The 1940 census found less than 300,000 skins produced from minks in pens in the United States. In 1948 there was a tremendous increase to 2 million skins. About 40 percent of these were of the dark standard type; the rest were hybrids or mutations of various kinds (fig. 1). The softer, more delicate shades are most popular. Through selective matings the standard dark mink became very dark or almost black. The best specimens have a full dense fur, with the color of the underfur a contrast to that of the guard hair. The underfur should be about

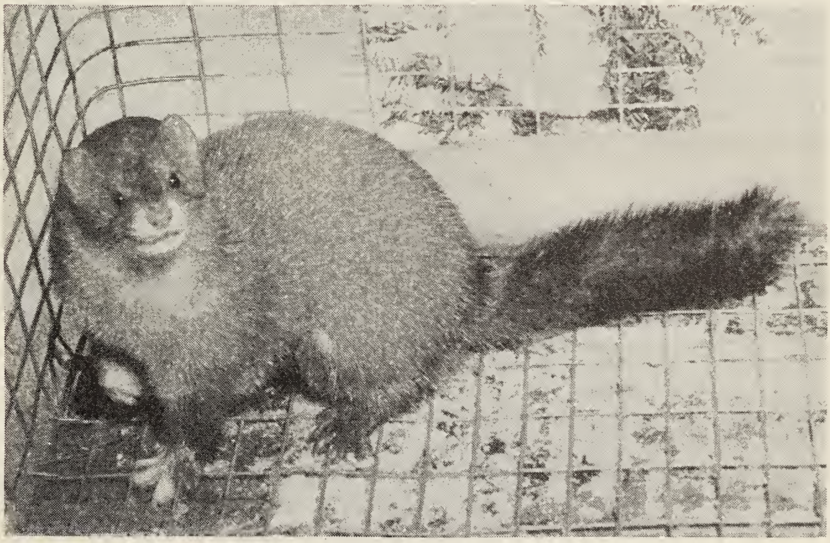

Figure 1.—Breath of Spring Pastel—a mutation mink.

five-eighths inch long and the guard hair about one-half again as long, though these measurements may vary with style requirements.

On an average, mature female minks weigh from 1½ to 2 pounds and males 2½ to 3 pounds and even up to 4 pounds. The sexes are kept in separate pens except at breeding time, when 1 male may serve 8 to 10 females. Breeding time is about the first week in March. In minks, as in rabbits and certain other animals, the act of breeding is necessary to cause the ova to be released. There is a varying period of delayed implantation of the embryos and consequently the gestation period varies from 40 to 76 days. Litters of 9 to 10 may be produced, but a ranch average of 4 for each female kept is considered satisfactory. Young minks are weaned from 7 to 8 weeks of age, when they should weigh about 0.9 pound, the females being slightly heavier than the males. They are ready for pelting about the last of November of the same year. The animals will breed the next spring when about 11 months old.

Minks may be kept in individual pens having 10 to 20 square feet of floor space, the size depending on whether the animals are to be pelted or kept for breeding. Large colony houses with smaller pens having raised wire floors, with part of the pen projecting beyond the roof, are satisfactory. Small detachable nest boxes facilitate care of the animals.

Feed for minks is similar to that for foxes except that more raw meat and offal are required and larger quantities of fish may be fed with safety. A mature mink consumes about one-fourth pound of feed daily. Females suckling litters naturally eat more and are fed twice daily. Other adult animals are fed restricted quantities only once in the evening. Minks to be pelted should be fed all they will eat. A ration composed entirely of dry feeds has not proved satisfactory for minks.

The average prices for natural-colored mink skins in 1949 were from $15 to $16, which is just about the cost of production on the better farms. Skins of the more popular mutations brought higher prices; the less desirable pelts, lower. There is a good market for high-quality skins. Anyone interested in raising minks should study all phases carefully before starting. Unless he has exceptional ability it is questionable whether he should enter this business. Circular 801, Mink Raising (issued by the U. S. Department of Agriculture), gives further details.

CHINCHILLAS

The chinchilla is a small rodent native to South America. A few animals were first imported into the United States in 1923. It is estimated that there were 60,000 of these animals in the United States by 1948. Most chinchillas are sold for breeding stock at high prices. Pelt values have not yet been established on prime pelts from pen-raised animals. The ultimate object of a sound industry should be the production of pelts for commercial use. Prices of breeding stock will probably be materially lower when this has been accomplished.

Chinchillas weigh about 1½ pounds at maturity, the females weighing slightly more than the males. They look very much like squirrels. Their fur is extremely fine and silky, blue-grey in color, with characteristic white bands around the guard hairs (fig. 2).

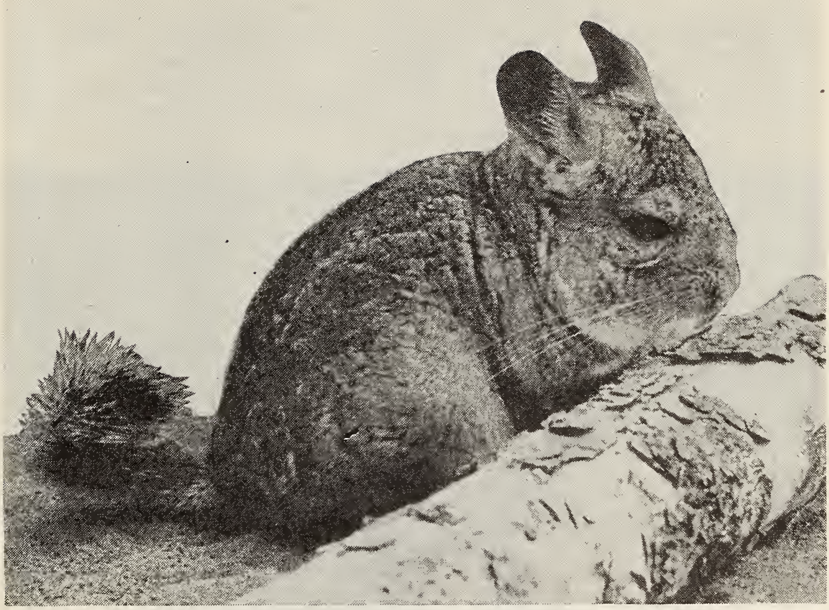

Figure 2.—A young chinchilla produced on a Colorado farm.

Pair mating of chinchillas is customary and a pair may produce two litters a year of from one to three young per litter. The gestation period is about 111 days. The young are fully furred and have their eyes open at birth. They are weaned at about 2 months of age and will breed at 6 to 8 months.

Many chinchillas are kept in small metal cages in basements. Larger producers have special small-animal buildings. A peculiarity of the species is the regularity with which these small animals like to dust themselves by rolling. The feeds commonly fed to rodents, such as grains, vegetables, and legume roughages, are used.[3]

MARTENS

The marten (fig. 3) is a fine-furred animal, once widely distributed in forested areas in the northern half of the country, but now reduced by over-trapping to such an extent that many States prohibit its trapping. Mature martens weigh from 1½ to 3 pounds, the males being heavier than the females. The tail is bushy and about 8 inches long. The fur is fine and silky and varies in color from dark to light reddish brown, with throat and chest patches of brilliant yellow and orange and of white. As males are polygamous, the sexes should be kept separate except at mating time which is July and August. The gestation period is from 259 to 275 days during several months of which the early stages of the embryos are not implanted or attached to the maternal organs. Though the females breed regularly each year, only about 15 to 20 percent produce young. Twenty litters obtained over several years at the United States Fur Animal Experiment Station, Saratoga Springs, N. Y., averaged 2.6 young per litter. The young weigh about 0.9 pound when weaned at 8 weeks of age and are sexually mature at about 15 months. Pelts of young martens are prime early in their first winter.

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[3] Further information is available in Leaflet No. 266, Chinchilla Raising, issued by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

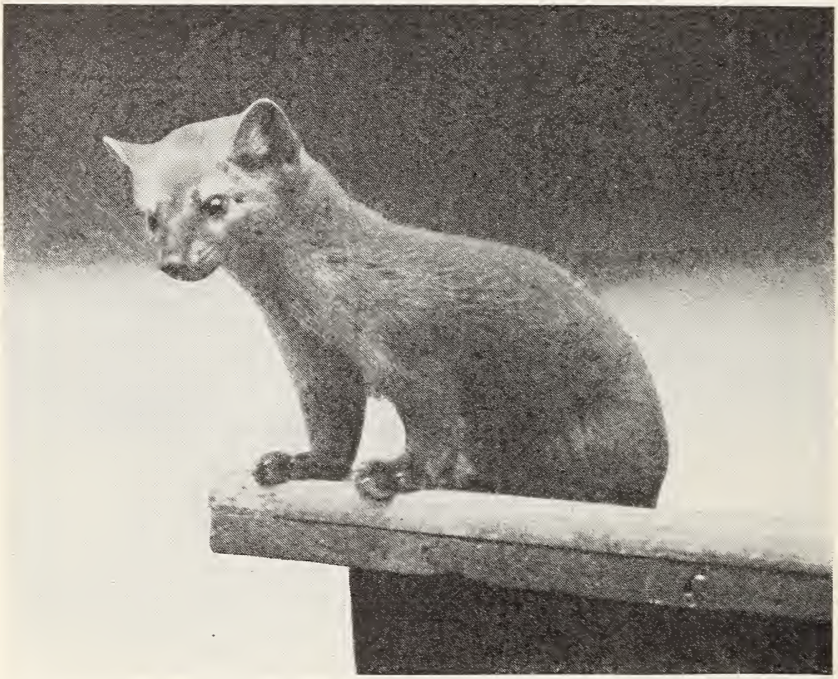

FIGURE 3.—A young marten produced in captivity at the U. S. Fur Animal Experiment Station, Saratoga Springs, N. Y.

The most satisfactory pens are at least 6 by 6 by 10 feet. It is well to have the pen 10 feet high, as martens are very active and like to climb. A nest box may be hung in the corner of the pen or in the crotch of a tree inside the pen. Martens thrive on about the same kind of feed as foxes and minks. They will eat from 5 to 8 ounces a day and particularly relish dried small fruits and berries.

Martens raised in captivity are not yet on a pelt basis because of their low productivity. Once this baffling condition has been eliminated, marten farming may become profitable, as these animals are attractive and there is a possibility that the color and quality of their fur may be improved through selective breeding.

FISHERS

Fishers are rather ferocious forest animals. They may weigh as much as 18 pounds. The body is from 24 to 30 inches long and the tail, about 15 inches. The fur is of poorer quality than that of the marten, is medium to dark brown, and does not have spots on throat and chest, as the marten does.

The gestation period in the fisher is about 340 to 350 days, during a considerable part of which the embryos are not implanted. The fisher mates about 10 to 15 days after whelping a litter. The size of litters varies from one to five, with an average of three. Fishers are believed to be old enough to mate when 1 year old.

Fishers may be penned and fed in the same manner as martens. Because of their larger size and greater strength, pens and equipment should be more substantial. Reproduction of the fisher in captivity is not at all satisfactory, though some ranchers have obtained better results with fishers in this respect than others have with martens. At present, raising fishers in captivity for their fur is not recommended.

NUTRIAS

The nutria, or coypu, is a rodent native to South America. Though similar to the beaver in appearance, it has some of the characteristics of the muskrat (fig. 4). It is a marsh animal, living in the wild on roots, stems, seeds, and grasses. Several years ago some of these animals were imported into the United States to be raised in pens. Some escaped; others were turned loose by disappointed fur ranchers. Sizable colonies are now established in the wild in Washington, Texas, and Louisiana. Louisiana reports 50,000 nutrias trapped from its marshes in 1948.

Male nutrias weigh from 20 to 25 pounds, and females 15 to 20 pounds. The mammary glands are along the side of the back. As

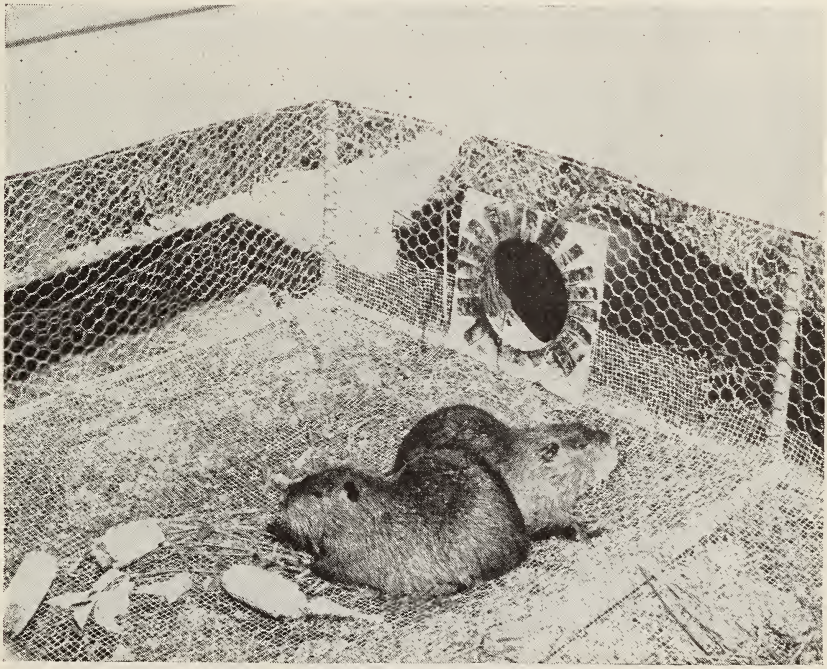

FIGURE 4.—A pair of young nutrias.

many as 10 females may be kept in a pen of suitable size with 1 male. They breed when about 8 to 10 months of age. The gestation period is 130 to 135 days. Litters may be as large as 10, but the average is about 4. Two litters may be produced in a year in the natural habitat, but when raised in captivity they do not breed so readily nor are their litters so large.

Pelts from pen-raised nutrias are poorer in quality than those from trapped animals. The belly fur of nutrias is the most valuable whereas in other fur animals the most desirable fur is found on the back. The coarse guard hairs are plucked out in dressing operations, thereby giving the finished fur a soft, silky appearance. The better skins are used in their natural color, others are dyed. Large pens, with running water, are desirable for good results. Cereal grains, legume hays, and vegetables are commonly fed.

It is doubtful whether raising nutrias in pens will be profitable, unless some new striking colors develop or fur of exceptional quality can be obtained. Nutrias may become established in the wild so abundantly that the extra labor and feed necessary with pen-raised animals will not return a profit.

BEAVERS

Raising beavers (fig. 5) in pens for their fur is not advisable, because strictly regulated conservation measures by the States have increased their numbers in the wild.

A number of black beavers have been produced in captivity. White, golden, and platinum beavers have also been developed but not on a commercial scale.

The few persons who have had fair success in raising beavers in captivity have provided running water and concrete pens and dens. They

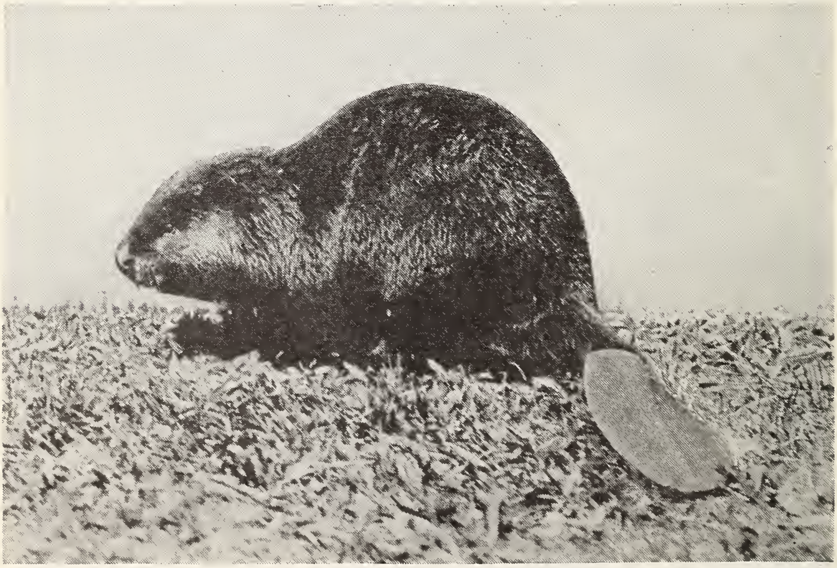

Figure 5.—A beaver with characteristic broad, flat tail. (Courtesy of U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.)

supplied limbs and twigs of aspen, poplar, cottonwood, or similar trees, and grains and vegetables as food. Large areas have been fenced in to provide conditions similar to those in the wild and yet prevent beavers from migrating. This makes a very expensive initial investment.

Beavers are sexually mature at 2 to 3 years of age. Young are born in late May after a gestation period of about 95 days. The single litter a year averages from four to five young. Some beavers weigh as much as 60 pounds.

MUSKRATS

Raising muskrats in captivity for their fur is not advisable because they are plentiful in the wild. Nearly every State has some muskrats. As many as 5 million muskrat pelts have been taken in a single year in the State of Louisiana alone. Controlling water levels and building up plant life in certain marsh areas would benefit this animal.

FITCHES

The general principles of feeding and management of minks apply also to raising fitches. Fitches, however, are somewhat more docile, breed twice a year—in February and in July—and usually produce larger litters. As their skins vary greatly in color, they must be dyed or blended to make satisfactory trimming. Raising fitches in captivity for their fur is not advisable; large quantities of skins are imported to sell at a nominal figure.

RACCOONS

Raccoons have been raised in pens, but rather to be liberated as game animals than for their fur. Black raccoons have been developed by selective breeding. Prices for raccoon skins are too low to warrant their production in captivity. The animals, however, are easily cared for. Pens should be built to prevent escape by climbing or by digging out. A variety of feeds, cooked or raw, can be used and fruits are relished. Raccoons are heavy feeders. Males are polygamous. Litters usually come in March to April and average about four young, after a gestation period of 63 days. Raccoons will breed the spring following their birth.

OTHER FUR ANIMALS

It is not advisable to try to raise skunks in captivity for their fur, as they are available in abundance in the wild. Nor is the raising of weasels (fur known as ermine) in captivity advisable, because the skins of the American weasel are not as desirable as the Russian and Canadian skins, and apparently the animals are abundant in those countries in the wild. Opossum is a rather coarse fur and the animals are prolific and widely distributed. Land otters do not reproduce satisfactorily in captivity.

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